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The revised CILIP definition of information literacy

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On 6th April 2018 the Information Literacy Group (ILG) issued the revised Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) definition of information literacy at the Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC) 2018 at the University of Liverpool (CILIP, 2018). Revising the definition took almost two years, to update the original definition which was devised in 2005. Debbi Boden-Angell, the founder and former Chair of ILG, spoke at the conference, along with Jo Cornish representing CILIP and myself as the current Chair of the ILG. The new definition is:

Information literacy is the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to develop informed views and to engage fully with society.

Why did ILG revise the definition?

The original CILIP definition of information literacy was published in 2005. It took considerable effort to reach a consensus on the wording and it was written by members of the fledgling ILG (which at the time was not a full special interest group of CILIP) and the CILIP policy team. While it had many strengths as a definition, in recent years there was a growing feeling amongst the ILG Committee that the original definition was focused on functional skills – seeing information literacy fundamentally about finding, evaluating and using information. Meanwhile, the UNESCO Alexandria Proclamation, issued the same year as the original CILIP definition (IFLA, 2015), viewed information literacy as something that ‘empowers people in all walks of life’ to achieve their life goals and that it ‘underpins lifelong learning.’ UNESCO’s definition also encompassed media literacy and took a broad and aspirational view of information literacy, whereas the CILIP definition was largely aimed at and used by librarians. There was a belief that CILIP’s definition related to librarians working in formal education, rather than viewing information literacy as something that everyone should be entitled to and relevant to a wide variety of contexts. The work I did last year as part of an ACRL paper on Global Perspectives on Information Literacy (ACRL, 2017) convinced me further the definition was in need of a review. I was aware that research and initiatives in information literacy in the UK were not truly reflected in the definition we had and as a profession we wanted to be more confident and bolder about our assertions related to information literacy.

How did we revise the definition?

The definition has had input and consultation with ILG members, CILIP and information literacy experts over the past two years. In 2016 the ILG consulted with members, via a survey which asked people how they defined information literacy and what features they wanted to see in a new definition. These findings were passed to a small working group of the committee, who started work on drafting the new definition. The working group, led by the ILG Deputy Chair at the time, the late Rowena Macrae-Gibson, also used feedback collected from delegates at LILAC 2017. In the closing panel at last year’s conference I led a session with Nick Poole, CILIP’s Chief Executive, to find out what people wanted the new definition of information literacy to include.

The working group comprised representatives from higher education and public libraries and also included the Journal of Information Literacy (JIL) Editor-in-Chief, Emma Coonan and

Geoff Walton, Chair of the JIL Editorial Board. They finally produced a version of the definition which was taken to the CILIP Board in November 2017. It was met with broad approval although some minor amendments were suggested at this point. Work was undertaken to refine the definition from November until March 2018, when it was signed off and prepared as a glossy brochure for distribution at LILAC 2018.

What the definition includes

There are three parts to the definition, a high-level statement (reproduced above) and a secondary statement, with some additional explanation including how information literacy is relevant in five contexts. These include:

- Everyday life – the idea that information literacy is useful in our daily lives, for example when we check hotel reviews, compare insurance policies or learn how to avoid scams or online fraud.
- For citizenship – information literacy enables us to participate in democracy, make judgements and recognise bias and misinformation and help to address social exclusion.
- Education – information literacy applies to all levels of learning, including formal, informal and lifelong learning. It's vital it is embedded into the curriculum as part of critical thinking and knowledge development.
- Workplace – in this context information literacy helps to achieve organisational aims, adds value and involves working ethically with data and knowledge. It may be more commonly known as knowledge or data management in the workplace.
- Health – more commonly known as health literacy in this context, it helps patients and their families make informed choices about their health and wellbeing and ensures people are able to find and use reliable healthcare sources when looking for treatment or long-term management of health-related conditions.

The final part of the definition discusses the role of information professionals across all sectors in supporting and developing information literacy; from school and public librarians to those in health or other workplace settings. It also recognises the need for education and professional development for librarians to equip them with the skills they need to support or teach information literacy. The ILG see contributing to the education and professional development of the profession as one of their key objectives.

You can read the full statement here and download the brochure from:

<https://infolit.org.uk/ILdefinitionCILIP2018.pdf>

Further plans

Since LILAC 2018, ILG and CILIP are planning a wider campaign to promote the new definition and also to promote the concept of information literacy as something that everyone is entitled to. There are several ideas about how to promote this idea of 'universal information literacy' but central to this campaign is the idea of involving parents and grass roots organisations in the work of ILG. The group are very happy to speak at events and conferences and have already devised a panel discussion at the CILIP Conference in July 2018 in Brighton to talk about information literacy in the public library, school and health sector. The group are also keen to develop further resources and case studies to sit under each of the five contexts, and will be looking to work with specialists in each of the key areas. If you wish to get involved in this work then please contact us.

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